

A visit with Shawn Dahlen

BY DAVID A. MITTELL, JR.

He is a lifelong “townie” who grew up to be a passionate “yachtie.” He is a conservationist who has spent the last 35 years building houses. He is a longtime town official who publicly displays his seemingly contradictory selves in ways any fool can see are bound to make him a target. But he seldom is. This is Selectman Shawn Dahlen. How does he pull it off? Historians of the future may liken him to Standish, Alden or King Caesar, but still find themselves perplexed. As a service to history let’s see if we can figure out what makes this guy tick! Shawn Dahlen was born in 1953, one of eight children of John and Sheila Dahlen, brainy parents both. The family had lived in Somerville, Natick, Concord and then briefly in California, before coming to Duxbury in 1962. They bought the captain’s house at 1043 Tremont Street. That’s the one near Dead Man’s Curve fronted by Brewster lilacs. It’s where all the Dahlen kids grew up. Growing up in a big family can make a lad a recluse – or it can teach him how to get along with people. Shawn Dahlen is not a recluse. Six of his siblings now live in Kingston, Plymouth or Marshfield, and the only one that got away is about to return. Duxbury to the Dahlens, as it is to so many, was an instant crazy-glue that stuck for life. Shawn has five children, also brainy. But at Duxbury High School, from which he graduated in 1971, he was a C student. Were the brains skipping a generation? (The reader will decide.) From 1971 to 1975 he commuted to Wentworth University with his father, who was on his way to his own work M.I.T. At Wentworth, Shawn studied civil engineering and engineering management and received degrees in each, the latter with honors. While at DHS, Shawn worked for Walter Prince moving houses, and for Walter’s associate, Edward “Barney” Bernard, pumping gas. He also worked for Goodrich Lumber doing many odd jobs. His mentors were Barney Bernard, Bud Goodrich, Brad Howard (who delivered oil for Goodrich and had his own landscaping business), Walter Prince, Elden Wadsworth and Chuck Walker. These were older people in business, who also served as town officials for many years. Above all, they always tried to help people.

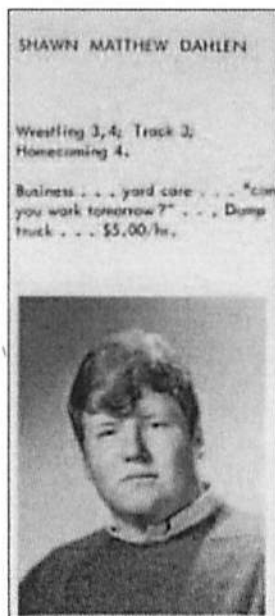
In 1970, while still at DHS, Shawn started his own landscaping business. In 1980, he bought 40 acres off Congress Street from Bud Goodrich and began building houses. His public service dates to 1978, when he was a member of the North Hill Study Committee. It includes 22 other town boards, committees and offices. For the last five years he has been a member of the Board of Selectmen, and twice its chairman.

Perhaps most revelatory were Shawn’s 13 years on the Conservation Commission (1982-1995). When petitioners came before the Commission he would try to get to “yes,” but when it was his duty to come to “no” he would not leave it at that. With his wide experience of the town and as a businessman, he would work with denied petitioners to bring them into compliance with the town’s conservation restrictions. He had learned from his mentors to treat all people with the same respect.

In business, Shawn’s goal is “to build clients for life...to build their house and to build their kid’s house.” In 35 years in a dispute-prone trade the Dahlen Company has only been sued once. Shawn’s very voice crackles with a tone of reason. Since that’s probably genetic we won’t give

him credit for it. But his record in public life and private business bespeaks a lad of 62 who knows how to get along with people.

Shawn's children are Shawn, Jr., Brian, Jennifer, Kevin and Tim, who have produced "eight-and-a-half" grandchildren. On a fact sheet Shawn notes interests in "sailing and volunteering." On sailing he is being evasive, since this is obviously an addiction. He has raced small craft in Duxbury Bay for decades, and competed in the Bermuda Race 11 times – nine aboard his 42-foot sloop, "Attitude." An "addiction" blessed by God, found in Duxbury. Shawn's volunteering includes trusteeships, among them Pilgrim Church, the Duxbury Bay Maritime School, the Duxbury Beach Reservation, and Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital, Plymouth. He notes that volunteer work, whether for private entities or in town service, brings to him much more than he gives. One hears occasional grumbling that – being a builder – Selectman Dahlen only greases the skids for other developers. We will listen to evidence of "swinging foul" in the nautical term – if it can be produced. But we see a richer picture. More like a living King Caesar.



Dahlen in the 1971 Duxbury High School yearbook.